

‘Wrath-kindled gentlemen’: anger and disorder in Homeric society

William Allan

Where the Homeric epics were first written down and by whom, we don’t know. That they were judged to be the greatest of the many early Greek epics, that we can be sure of. But – it seems obvious to ask – what is it that makes the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* so great? Well, as the poet says himself, ‘not even if I had ten tongues and ten mouths, and in me a voice unbreakable and a heart of bronze’, not even then could I exhaust the reasons for these poems being as compelling as they are. But one key element in the poems’ enduring popularity is the fact that if you read them, whether in Greek or in translation, you cannot fail to marvel at the way Homer has managed to create, in each poem, a complete and convincing heroic world.

In the case of the *Iliad*, which is the poem I shall focus on here, that world is the city of Troy and the Greek camp in the tenth year of the Trojan War. It is striking that Homer does not begin at the beginning (with Helen’s elopement from Sparta) nor does he end at the end (with the Fall of Troy) – instead he plunges *in medias res* and focuses his attention on a short but crucial period of a few days in the tenth and final year of the war. For it is during these few days that Achilles, the greatest warrior at Troy, will quarrel with Agamemnon and withdraw in anger from the fighting; that Hector will kill Achilles’ closest companion, Patroclus; and that Achilles will take his revenge by killing Hector, thus ensuring the destruction of Troy and the death or enslavement of Hector’s family.

There are, of course, countless angles from which to approach this heroic world, but here I would like to consider one of the most fundamental questions concerning Homeric heroism and Homeric society: namely, does Homer present his heroes, and the competition for honour that exists between them, so as to show that their society is destined to be destroyed by rivalry, or does he show us that such disorder and breakdown can be avoided?

Starting from anger

The first word of the *Iliad* is the Greek word *mēnis*, which means anger, and this is the key to understanding why the society of Greek warriors at Troy falls apart. For these are heroes who are not only hyper-sensitive to their reputation, but also prone to anger if they feel themselves disrespected. That such angry figures are liable to cause or face catastrophe was recognized not only by the great Greek tragedians (one thinks, for example, of Oedipus’ furious killing of his father Laius at the crossroads in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*), but also by Shakespeare. In Act 1, Scene 1 of Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, King Richard addresses John of Gaunt and the other angry nobles:

*Wrath-kindled gentlemen, be ruled by me;
Let's purge this choler without letting blood;
This we prescribe, though no physician;
Deep malice makes too deep incision;
Forget, forgive; conclude and be agreed;
Our doctors say this is no month to bleed.*

*Good uncle, let this end where it begun;
We'll calm the Duke of Norfolk, you your son.*

Like Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, Homer’s *Iliad* deals with angry men. Indeed, not only is anger the first word of the *Iliad*, but its entire plot, its tragic impact and its profound moral significance, all flow from the wrath of Achilles, who feels himself dishonoured by Agamemnon when the latter takes away his war-prize, his beloved Briseis. In the course of the *Iliad* Achilles’ anger against Agamemnon gives way to his furious desire to kill Hector and so avenge Patroclus, whose own death came as a result of Achilles’ stubborn anger and his unwillingness to respond to the apologetic overtures of Agamemnon. That there is a close link between anger and heroism in the Greek epic mentality is clear from the fact that the same word (*thumos*) can refer to both ‘heroic energy’ and ‘anger’. The major heroes of epic poetry are the *megathumoi* (the ‘great-hearted’), and they possess much *thumos* not only in the sense of having the greatest vitality and courage, but also in being most prone to taking offence and feeling anger at their enemies.

Agamemnon’s grievance

We might begin by asking what makes Achilles and Agamemnon so angry in the first place, and what view of their anger does the narrator encourage us to take? The answers to both questions become clear if we consider how the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon is developed by Homer, especially in the first book of the *Iliad*. Agamemnon refuses the appeal of the priest Chryses, who offers a substantial ransom for his daughter. The poet tells us pointedly that all the Greeks wanted to accept the priest’s offer (‘then all the other Achaeans shouted their agreement, to respect the priest’s claim and take the splendid ransom’); only Agamemnon does not. Thus Agamemnon defies popular opinion, yet the dishonouring of Apollo’s priest, which was Agamemnon’s decision, leads to death and misery for the Greeks as a whole, as Chryses prays to Apollo and the Achaean army is decimated by a plague. Agamemnon is immediately seen as a far from ideal leader, or (to use the Homeric epithet) a poor ‘shepherd of the people’.

Forced to back down, and to return Chryseis *without a ransom*, Agamemnon is furious at the loss of his war-prize, which he takes as a personal slight to his status. He demands an immediate replacement, but Achilles, addressing Agamemnon as ‘most acquisitive of all men’ (not the most ingratiating way to begin any piece of advice!), urges him to wait, ‘and we Achaeans will recompense you three and four times over, if ever Zeus grants that we sack the well-walled city of Troy’. However, both Agamemnon’s anger at his perceived loss of status and his sensitivity about his heroic abilities (especially in relation to Achilles, the supreme warrior) blind him to the benefits of this solution. Choosing instead to insist on his superior status as the *basileus* (‘king’, or better ‘chieftain’) with greatest authority, Agamemnon threatens to take away Achilles’ own war-prize,

'the fair-cheeked Briseis'.

Hair-trigger temper

Now it is Achilles' turn to be enraged and he thinks about killing Agamemnon on the spot, a remarkable over-reaction and an early signal of Achilles' hair-trigger temper. Athena appears to him alone and persuades him not to take Agamemnon's life, adding 'There will be a day when three times these splendid gifts will be laid before you because of this insult'. However, when massive compensation is finally offered to Achilles by Agamemnon in Book 9, Achilles' own festering anger leads him to reject the offer, even though, as Nestor says, Agamemnon's gifts 'can no longer be faulted', and even though all three members of the Embassy (Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax) make it clear that they consider the compensation adequate. Yet just as Agamemnon's anger at his perceived loss of status in Book 1 prevented him from accepting both the ransom for Chryseis ('do not provoke me, if you want to return in safety' was his warning to Chryseis' father) and the promise of future recompense, so Achilles allows his rage to obscure the benefits (both to himself and his comrades) of Agamemnon's offer of compensation. And as with Agamemnon's initial error, Achilles' decision damages both himself and his fellow Achaeans, leading to the loss of his dearest friend and ultimately his own death.

What we have observed so far is the breakdown of order in Homeric society as a result of anger and excessive self-assertion. But Homer also shows us how this very same community can function perfectly well with the competing claims of warriors who are hyper-sensitive to their status and honour. For in Book 23, during the athletic competitions held at the funeral of Patroclus, a similar dispute about a prize breaks out between two Greek leaders. During the chariot race (the first and most important event of the Games) Eumelus takes the lead but the goddess Athena forces him to crash, so that her favourite, Diomedes, can come first. Menelaus lies in second place but he is overtaken by Antilochus, who drives past him recklessly at a narrow point in the track, forcing Menelaus to give way so as to avoid a collision. Antilochus comes second, Menelaus third, Meriones fourth, and poor Eumelus last of all. Achilles awards Diomedes first prize, but also proposes awarding second prize to Eumelus, since, though he didn't win, he is known to be the best charioteer. Antilochus explodes in anger at the thought of being robbed of his prize and Achilles agrees that he can keep it. But now Menelaus is enraged and accuses Antilochus of cheating.

So once again we have a stand-off between two angry heroes, and one that the poet wants us to compare with the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon in Book 1. However, unlike Agamemnon and Achilles, Antilochus and Menelaus realize what they owe to each other ('you are my senior and better', Antilochus tells Menelaus, while the latter acknowledges 'you have been through much suffering and much trouble for my sake'), and each hero backs down, preventing their quarrel from escalating. Moreover, the crucial moment in the defusion of their dispute is marked by a remarkable simile:

And his [Menelaus'] heart was melted like the dew on the ears of growing corn, when the fields are bristling with the crop - so your heart, Menelaus, was melted within you.

This striking image of Menelaus' melting anger not only confirms the audience's response to the quarrel that began the poem, but also underlines the importance of controlling this emotion if disputes between heroes are not to end disastrously. So, in conclusion, Books 1 and 23 show in their different ways that the communal ethics and institutions of Homeric society can function well, as long as the heroes do not allow themselves to be so driven by anger that they end up harming themselves and their comrades. Thus, if we return to our original questions – namely, why do we still read Homer and what is it that makes

the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* so great? – we can see it is in large part because he engages with real and permanent dilemmas (such as conflicts over status or the defusion of anger) which, though to some extent culturally specific, have analogues in all cultures, including our own.

William Allan is an exiled Scot who teaches Classics at University College, Oxford. His favourite things are (in ascending order) chocolate, swimming, football, and the Iliad. He is seized by Wrath whenever Celtic lose.